The Education and Mobility of Left-behind Children: a review

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Introduction

Massive rural-urban migration has been taking place since the 1980s due to the urbanisation and industrialisation of China in the post-Mao era coupled with the relaxation of the household registration (*hukou*) system. In its wake is the phenomenon of a large left-behind population in the rural areas: left-behind parents, spouses and children of these internal migrants. This paper would be focusing on the left-behind children of rural China.

According to a study conducted by the All-China Women’s Federation (2013) based on 2010 figures, about 40% of the children in many rural areas are left-behind. There are approximately 61 million of these children in China (ibid.). They are defined as children from ages 0 to 17, who have at least one migrant parent working in cities for an extended period of the year. Their parents mostly only come home during Chinese New Year and are away for almost a decade on average (Ye, 2011). Such children can be differentiated into two types – children with migrant parents, and children with a single migrant parent (usually the father) (Ye & Pan, 2011; Lee, 2011; Murphy 2014; Zhou, Murphy & Tao, 2014).

Even though the *hukou* system has been relaxed, it is still challenging for migrant parents to bring their children with them as there is still unequal access to resources for rural *hukou* holders in urban cities. For example, migrant families are excluded from the social welfare system and migrant children are not entitled to free public education (Ye & Pan, 2011). They either have to pay large additional fees or are rejected from the public schools (ibid.). Hence, despite the concern of possible detrimental effects on these children, migrant parents still venture out on their own for better economic prospects.
There are mainly four types of care-giving arrangements for these children: living with the left-behind parent, living with their grandparents, living with another relative or living without caregivers (Ye & Pan, 2011; Ye, 2011). Out of which, the first two arrangements are the most common (Ye & Murray, 2005).

Extensive research on the impact of parental migration on children has been carried out, with focus on health, education, and emotional and psychological well-being. However, the results have generally been mixed, with different studies concluding different positive and negative impacts. This could be due to the different methods or samples employed.

Studies have shown that educational attainment has developed unevenly across China, parental migration generally has a net negative effect on education and that it is mediated by gender. Migration has also entrenched the importance of education in these split families. The relationship between mobility and education in the rural areas is also often misunderstood.

The following section would be divided into three parts. Firstly, the importance of education in China, secondly, the mobility of left-behind children, and thirdly, the impact of parental migration on the education of the left-behind children. Lastly, there would be a conclusion to round up the paper.

**The Importance of Education in China**

Education has historically been prized in China, due to the dominant Confucian values. The one-child policy has also restricted the number of offspring families could have, decreasing the competition for parental resources and in turn, increasing parental investment for each child.
Parents believe that their children’s success in education and work will be the “key determinant” of their children’s and their own future happiness (Fong, 2002). Hence, with all their hopes and aspirations pinned on usually just one child, parents will do “whatever is necessary” to ensure the success of their children (ibid.). The high cost of higher levels of education (senior high school and university) is one of the reasons why rural parents migrate away in a bid to earn and save more money for their children’s education (Murphy, 2014; Ye, 2011; Ye & Pan, 2011; Zhou et al., 2014; Bi & Oyserman, 2015).

In the light of these circumstances, ‘filial piety’ has interestingly been “widely invoked” to inculcate a sense of intergenerational obligation in children to reciprocate their parents’ sacrifices for them through education (Murphy, 2014; Ye & Pan, 2011). This has entrenched the importance of education in these migrant families.

Inherent in this parental attitude is the belief in the importance of education in the advancement of social mobility. This is in line with the general consensus in the field. According to Treiman and Deng (1997), education is viewed as the “engine” for social mobility in modern societies.

Social Mobility

Social mobility is defined as the extent to which an individual’s socioeconomic standing is determined by his or her family of origin (Zeng & Xie, 2014). The literature on education and mobility in China has been mainly focused on comparing the rural with the urban, with a good number of them highlighting the inequality present (Golley & Kong, 2013; Hannum, An & Cherng, 2011). Many of these comparative studies are quantitative in nature, drawing from censuses or other such large-scale reports or surveys. There is also newer literature on migrant
children, who are the children of migrant parents who live with their parents in the cities. The studies focusing solely on migrant children or urban children would be excluded from this review as the focus is on left-behind children from rural areas and the challenges faced by these three groups differ.

The studies show that despite the significant increase in average educational attainment of students, the development is an unequal one (Hannum, An & Cherng, 2011; Golley & Kong, 2013). Compulsory education cannot be overlooked as one of the significant contributing factors to this trend. Education up until middle school is deemed compulsory for all students, which almost guarantees a basic nine years of education. However, it seems like the educational attainment of the rural areas mainly stops there while the educational attainment of urban areas continue to increase. According to Golley and Kong (2013), in the 9th cohort sampled (those born in the years of 1981 – 1985), 93 per cent of urban children either completed high school degrees or achieved college degrees, compared with 40 per cent of migrants and 33 per cent of rural children. The difference is roughly three times. There also seems to be a gender disparity.

Hannum, An and Cherng (2011) argue that examinations reinforce inequalities but are preceded by other generalised disparities such as wealth, an established tradition of education in the village, available educational infrastructure and father’s education. These factors matter at different stages of education. There is also a social or socioeconomic selection of students who take the high school exams and above. Golley and Kong (2013) found that while parents’ education is influential in raising better educated children, it is not a “perfect predictor”. Females’ educational attainment is also more “tightly-bound” to their father’s educational attainment (ibid.). Hannum, An and Cherng (2011) agree that more girls have been selected out by examinations.
In terms of intergenerational mobility, Golley and Kong (2013) argue that mobility in rural China can involve both upwards and downwards movement, and that mobility is not necessarily “desirable”, nor does it necessarily imply an improvement in educational attainment. Household income and the quality of education are significant factors in determining educational attainment, which can prove to be barriers for lower-income rural children (Hannum, An & Cherng, 2011; Golley & Kong, 2013). Zeng and Xie (2014) found that grandparents’ education directly influences their grandchildren but only when they live together.

Seeing how parents seem to have a strong influence on their children’s education, the discussion will now move onto the impact of parental migration on their left-behind children.

**Impact of Parental Migration on Left-behind children’s Education**

The impact of parental migration on their children’s education seems to be more detrimental than good (Zhou et al., 2014; Ye, 2011; Ye & Pan, 2011). The impact is also mediated by gender. It is generally argued that a mix of parental care and income is important to educational outcomes and that the negative effects of the lack of parental care outweigh the positive effects of increased household income (ibid.). The household income of migrant families as compared to non-migrant families seems to be greater and it is definitely beneficial in some ways. However, it is insufficient to compensate for the negative care effects of parental absence (Zhou et al., 2014). Other positive effects include the access to information and social networks for migration and motivation to study harder to escape their parents’ predicaments in future. Studying and school can also be used by children as a coping strategy for the pressures of parental absences and high
academic expectations (Murphy, 2014). Positive selves and strategies of these children can also positively impact their results (Bi & Oyserman, 2015).

The educational attainment of left-behind children lags behind other groups of children. Lee (2011) states that school enrolment and years of schooling in particular are affected by parental migration. Their grades are also affected, though there are variations between children with single and dual migrant parents (Zhou et al., 2014; Lee, 2011). Zhou et al. (2014) found that there is no significant difference in test scores between children with non-migrant parents and left-behind children with a single migrant parent. Lee (2011) found that not only will the academic results between these two groups be unaffected, those with a single migrant parent may even score better than those with non-migrant parents. Both agree that parental migration affects children with dual migrant parents the most out of these three groups.

Furthermore, left-behind children are negatively affected in other ways: the stress of parental expectations with regards to academic results, labour burdens and increased workload, and academic supervision and environment.

As mentioned earlier, studying hard and doing well in school has become the obligation of left-behind children to show filial piety towards their migrant parents. They are reminded not only by their parents but also by guardians and other family members. This places stress on them and could lead to unhappiness and resentment as there is the perception that their parents care more about their results than them (Murphy, 2014; Ye, 2011). There is also the burden of inadequate grades on their emotional and psychological wellbeing, which can affect their studies even more. Additionally, it may also reduce their motivation to study beyond middle school or even prevent them from doing so. The lack of labour in the family makes it likely that these children would be
required to help out in the farm, with housework and even caring for their guardians. This reduces the time they have to study and would have an impact on their academic results and hence educational attainment (Ye & Pan, 2011; Lee, 2011). The lack of academic supervision is also an issue as migrant parents are usually more educated than their parents, who are not able to become substitutes for this role. Grandparents also tend to be lowly educated and too busy with farming, housework or caregiving to give these children a good academic environment (Ye 2011). However, Zeng and Xie (2014) argue that coresidence with lowly educated grandparents do not affect educational attainment.

Gender features prominently in these studies. Mother-only migrant families contain “inherent vulnerabilities” (Murphy, 2014; Zhou et al., 2014). Maternal care is irreplaceable and important to the general and also educational wellbeing of children. Children from father-only migrant families tend to do better in school and are more holistic in their wellbeing as compared to children from mother-only and dual migrant parent families (Zhou et al., 2014; Lee, 2011). This could be due to traditional gender roles that the mother is the main caregiver while the father is the main breadwinner. Academically, girls also tend to do better than their male counterparts (Murphy, 2014; Zhou et al., 2014). This could be attributed to the female perception that there is a need to work hard to earn respect (Murphy, 2014). The increased workload, labour burdens and caring for guardians at home also disproportionately affect girls more than boys (Ye & Pan, 2011; Ye 2011). This could be due to gender roles and will also negatively affect some girls.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that parental migration has mixed effects on left-behind children. It is mediated by gender, the caregiving arrangement at home, and also the number of migrant parents. The studies employed in this review are mostly quantitative in nature. While that helps in the multivariate analysis of large datasets, qualitative studies are also required to get in-depth insights. Research on left-behind children with regards to social mobility can also be expanded.

Bi and Oyserman (2015) observed that the Chinese “culturally sanctioned” acceptance of fate is more likely to “accentuate” children’s endorsement of fatalism than a “wide open view” that “anything is possible”. Parental migration can structure their worldview to be one or the other, and this has significant effects on their attitudes towards education and even mobility. Hence, it is proposed that perhaps qualitative studies of the attitudes of left-behind children towards education and mobility could be on the agenda for future research.
References


